

Tip of the



Prevention information from The Western Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies

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April 1, 2001

Media Advocacy

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The following information is from one of the many sections in the Prevention Primer. This encyclopedia of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug prevention terms can be located at: www.health.org/govpubs/PHD627/index.htm.

For many years the main role of the media for preventing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems has been to build general awareness of the problem and to direct messages at the individual to change behavior regarding alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. Media advocacy, however, shifts the message from individual behavior change to collective behavior change; that is, to norms and policies.

A working definition of media advocacy is "the strategic use of media as a resource for advancing a social or public policy initiative." This contrasts substantially with the traditional mass media approach which focuses on individual behavior.

As an example, a few years ago community members were concerned about an announcement at an Oakland Athletics baseball game about a promotion for Bud Lite at a future game. Small flashlights with Bud Lite inscribed on them would be given away to anyone who came to the ballpark who was 16 years of age or older although the legal drinking age is 21.

Community members decided to challenge Anheuser-Busch for promoting this particular product to underage youth through the use of a

novelty item--Bud Lite flashlights. Using contacts with the media they raised public concern about the beer promotion and Anheuser-Busch canceled its planned giveaway.

This is one way of focusing on alcohol policy through the media in a way that contrasts with the traditional focus on behavior change. It focused public attention on the policy issues. The question was, shouldn't the alcohol industry know when to say "when" in their efforts to promote alcohol to underage youth?

In media advocacy, challenging conventional wisdom and public thinking is important. Mass media become the arena for contesting public policies and for shifting emphasis from individual behavior change to collective behavior change and policies. Media advocates ask themselves how a media opportunity can best advance policy goals and shift the debate from individuals to the collective decisions of policies and norms.

Using contacts with electronic or print media editors and reporters, advocates can generate public interest in changing industry promotional practices, media policies, tax laws, law enforcement practices, labeling laws, school rules, workplace policies, health care policies, community norms, or other factors that may contribute to youth alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.

Reporters may not be aware of factors in their communities that promote alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. By using specific media-related skills, prevention practitioners can provide them with interesting information and stories that further prevention agendas. Those skills include research, issue framing, and gaining access to media outlets.

Research

It is important for those using media advocacy to have current, relevant facts and figures on hand and be able to discuss their implications for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug issues. Reporters and editors are more likely to contact people they know who have access to reliable facts when they are researching a story. It is important to be able to back up positions with concrete information and data.

Solid research in the alcohol, tobacco, and other drug field is readily available to prevention practitioners interested in media advocacy. One major resource is the Center for Substance Abuse

Prevention's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI). By calling 1-800-729-6686, prevention practitioners can obtain resource manuals, monographs, articles, and literature searches on any related topic. At the State level, RADAR Network Centers serve as local information clearinghouses. RADAR Network Centers can be located by calling NCADI.

In addition to gathering research on topics of specific interest, media advocates must also understand how local media operates. Which reporters are most likely to cover health issues? What are the names of relevant news editors? Who should receive a news release? This information can be obtained by studying local media outlets and by telephoning the news departments and asking for names. Learning how the media prefers to receive information pays off by making the media advocate appear more professional and, therefore, more trustworthy.

Framing the Issue

Like the creative transformation of data, framing the issue, or influencing the terms of the debate, is really a strategy. With any issue, both sides attempt to frame the issue to make their positions seem most reasonable. For example, when media advocates point out that advertising alcoholic beverages to vulnerable populations should be limited by law, the alcoholic beverage industry attempts to frame their position in civic terms. The debate shifts from "Should children be targeted by beer companies?" to "Should beer companies have their First Amendment rights protected?"

In addition to framing the issues, the alcoholic beverage industry tries to frame itself in a positive light--presenting itself as supporter of sporting events, patron of local and national artistic endeavors, prevention educator of youth, and protector of freedoms.

According to Lawrence Wallack, Dr.PH, a professor at the School of Public Health, University of California at Berkeley, prevention practitioners have two means of reframing issues that the industry has framed to its own advantage. First, they can focus attention on promotional practices in the environment as the primary problem, not the behavior of individuals who drink. Second, they can address industry practices that appear unethical.

Gaining Access to the Media

Gaining access to the media involves watching for opportunities to contact the media with timely information. Contact may be established through a news release (with a follow-up telephone call), a letter to the editor, a guest editorial, or a telephone call to build interest in a story angle. Over time, media advocates can build credibility so that the media will contact them first when the possibility of an alcohol- or other drug-related story arises.

Gaining access to the media can help us gain community support for their efforts. For example, when SeaWorld in San Diego, California, owned by Anheuser-Busch, announced its intention to open a hospitality center where adult park patrons could get two free glasses of beer, prevention practitioners used media advocacy techniques to bring their concerns to the attention of the public. The resulting media coverage led to other groups and individuals joining a prevention coalition to continue SeaWorld protests and address other environmental issues.

References

Youth and Drugs: Society's Mixed Messages: CSAP Prevention Monograph 6 (1990) BK172

Tackling Alcohol Problems on Campus: Tools for Media Advocacy (1992) BK206

The six regional CAPTs are funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. For more information on this Tip of the CAPT or other WestCAPT services, please visit our web site: www.unr.edu/westcapt or our best practices website: www.open.org/westcapt.

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